

The THOREAU SOCIETY BULLETIN

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THOREAU AND HIS NEIGHBORS

By Raymond Adams

There is no doubt about it, the neighbors didn't like Thoreau. And they had reasons. Of course there were exceptions. But there is no doubt either that Thoreau didn't like the neighbors. And he had similar reasons. And again there were exceptions.

Leaving the exceptions aside for later mention, the reciprocal suspicions which Thoreau and the neighbors harbored for one another boil down to two, with Thoreau looking at them from one side and the neighbors looking at them from the other. There was the business side of their lives. The neighbors took a dim view of Thoreau's business because it was so unremunerative; and Thoreau took a dim view of their business because it was remunerative and because they paid too much attention to the remuneration. The second suspicion which both sides felt was that the other was posing. The neighbors thought Thoreau was playing a part and imitating some romantic ideal or other. Thoreau thought the neighbors were imitating decorum, were not living their own lives, but were living the lives imposed upon them by society. So there was a curious return fire that went on between the neighbors and Thoreau -- not in anger but in skepticism of the wisdom of the way of life each side had chosen for itself.

Village Vilification

First, and nearest at hand, there were the village neighbors. They might have known better, for they were located where they could see some of the practical aspects of Thoreau's work. They must have known that he worked in the pencil shop and that he gardened in a very practical way. They surely knew that he worked at building Texas House. They knew of course that he built some of the best fences in town. But they knew also that whereas their own sons and husbands worked mornings and afternoons at regular jobs, this Thoreau son, who refused to take on the responsibilities of a husband, worked mornings only, and skipped a good many mornings even. So they overlooked the work he did do. In their eyes there was not much virtue in a Harvard graduate's wasting his time making pencils, building fences, gardening, or even helping build Texas House. A man needn't go to Harvard to train for that. Gardeners and fence builders of sorts could be hired for fifty cents a day. The Thoreaus had wasted all their hard work paying Henry's way through college if that was all the work he'd do.

The villagers had known Henry's brother John. While the two were alive, John had eclipsed Henry. He was sociable, personable, popular. And young neighbors and their elders who had known John could not forget him in favor of Henry. Henry's later development did not impress them because John's earlier promise had impressed them so much.

One such villager was William S. Robinson, almost an exact contemporary of Henry Thoreau, for he was born in Concord on December 7, 1818, and was a schoolmate of John and Henry Thoreau all through their childhoods. His long, circumstantial account of the death of John is perhaps the best account of that tragedy (It is printed on pages 12-13 of *Warrington Pen Portraits*, 1877). It shows a preference for John over Henry, though as for that the two brothers were great favorites of Robinson. When, in 1854, William Robinson moved back to Con-

cord to be near his aged mother, he and Mrs. Robinson lived in a house owned by Thoreau's father and saw Henry regularly. It was the year of *Walden* and Mrs. Robinson writes, "His book was published in 1854, and drew many visitors to the little hut by the shore of the pond where the philosopher had lived on three cents a day, planted his beans, and written his immortal pages. The fact of his living so cheaply was much discussed in Concord, more even than the quality of his writings; and it was suspected by his incredulous townspeople that the 'cupboard of this disciple of Pythagorus was often replenished from his mother's larder.'" (*Warrington Pen Portraits*, p. 68) Here surely is a suggestion that the villagers often regarded Thoreau's claims as insincere.

Mr. Robinson himself, friend and defender of Henry Thoreau, reveals the common attitude of the villagers in one of his "Warrington" letters when he wrote:

It is fortunate for literature that Thoreau lived, and built his house on the shores of Walden Pond, when he did. If his birth had been postponed twenty years, we should never have had his most delightful book, and one of the most delightful of all American books. 'Walden' is as good of its kind as any thing in American or English literature. It is, on the whole, the best book ever written in Concord. He hated, or affected to hate, all crowds, and said the pleasantest place in Boston was the Fitchburg Railway Depot, because it was the road home. What would he say if he could see Walden Pond as it is now, on whose banks he built his little house, and lived, raising beans on his farm, and charming the fishes with his flute. (*Warrington Pen Portraits*, p. 68)

Notice that phrase "or affected to hate." Did boyhood friend Robinson mean to suggest that Thoreau was a poser? I suspect that this lifelong friend knew perfectly well that Henry Thoreau was a great talker and liked people, though probably not people in crowds. Anyway, he gives credence to the notion that Henry Thoreau had an element of affectation about him. Friend Robinson tried to put Thoreau in a favorable light; and even outside the literary group in Concord there were those who better understood what Thoreau was aiming at than to accuse him of perversity and pose.

But they were a minority in the village. The persistent theme of Doctor Emerson's book *Henry Thoreau as Remembered by a Young Friend* is that this legendary dislike of Thoreau must be corrected and dispelled. Indeed, Doctor Emerson's book is one of the best proofs that the misunderstanding and dislike was general in the village. The villagers did not understand the shift of emphasis in the Thoreau family business that turned it into a manufactory of fine black lead instead of pencils as formerly. But they did know that Thoreau said he would make no more pencils, having won the prize for the best one, which, says Doctor Emerson, "was counted to him for righteousness by a very few, and for laziness by most."

This is the principal charge made against him in his own neighborhood. Many solid practical citizens, whose love of wild Nature was about like Dr. Johnson's, asserted that he neglected a good business, which he might have worked with profit for his family and himself, to idle in the woods, and this cannot be forgiven." (page 31-2)

Nor could they quite forgive his going to live at Walden. Says Doctor Emerson, "By village fire-sides on winter evenings his foolish whim was gossiped over with pity." (page 53)

Concord was a trading village, a shopkeeper's town. These industrious fellows, working day and night, could not understand a seemingly lazy man who kept no shop and neglected his trade. Mr. Emerson knew that shopkeepers would not understand a poet or a nature lover, so he did not try to convert them into nature lovers,

"Yet do not I implore

The wrinkled shopman to my sounding woods" says Emerson in his 1847 Ode. Thoreau also knew he would be misunderstood in this matter. Nor could he understand his neighbors:

When sometimes I am reminded that the mechanics and shopkeepers stay in their shops not only all the forenoon, but all the afternoon too, sitting with crossed legs, so many of them, -- as if the legs were made to sit upon, and not to stand or walk upon, -- I think that they deserve some credit for not having all committed suicide long ago.

. . . I confess that I am astonished at the power of endurance, to say nothing of the moral insensibility, of my neighbors who confine themselves to shops and offices the whole day for weeks and months, aye, and months almost together.

His Mother's Son

There was another factor in the village attitude toward Henry Thoreau. Not only was he the lesser brother of John; he was, at least in the opinion of many village women, the overindulged son of Cynthia Dunbar Thoreau. In evidence there is the caustic appraisal of him written sometime after 1881 by Priscilla Rice Edes on the front flyleaves of a copy of *Excursions*. Priscilla Rice was born in Littleton, but she lived in Concord just east of the village and in 1850 was married in Concord. More than thirty years later she wrote her opinions of Thoreau, reflecting the sewing circle attitudes of Concord while Thoreau lived there:

Now about Thoreau -- "My Henry" as his mother used to call him. I never imagined anything great could be said of him. Mr. Thoreau and his wife were devoted Christians, and intellectual; but when I first knew them they were poor. The four children all grown up, as I a schoolgirl remember them, were finely educated and in sympathy with reforms:--"comeouters," strong abolitionists, and Christian workers. John was a teacher in the Academy, and was one of those saintly minded, clean young men that are seldom seen. He was a bright spot everywhere; the life of every gathering, and when he died suddenly by poison from the barber's razor the sun seemed to have gone out and the family's support withdrawn.

"David Henry" after leaving college was eccentric and did not like to, and so would not, work. The opposite of John in every particular, he was thin, insignificant, poorly dressed, careless looking young man, with thin, straight, shaggy hair and pale blue, watery looking eyes. After his brother's death the town demanded of him his own poll tax. He refused indignantly; "he was a free man and would not pay a tax in a state that endorsed slavery;" and he spent one night in jail. Some friend paid it that year and set him free but lost "David Henry's" friendship by the act. The next spring he was not to be found; he had gone to the woods near Walden Pond and had established himself in an unused charcoal burner's hut. Here in the solitude he became acquainted with himself and began to write.

Emerson was a lover of those woods and many hours they spent together. Once after a lecture by Thoreau someone remarked how much like Emerson he had spoken; his mother overhearing replied, "Yes, Mr. Emerson is a perfect counterpart of my 'David Henry'." She almost worshiped him.

"David Henry" did not care whether he was decently clothed or not. The ladies of the charitable society proposed to make him some cotton shirts, but that it best, first to ask his mother if it would be agreeable to him. Dear Mrs. Thoreau at the next meeting said, "I told my David Henry that you would like to make him some unbleached cotton shirts; he said 'unbleached mother, unbleached. Yes, that strikes my ears pleasantly; I think they may make me some'." A practical farmer's wife with no sentiment said in an aside, "Strike his ears pleasantly, indeed. I guess they will strike his back pleasantly when he gets them on."

The Farmers' Opinion

These village opinions (and I think they are representative of majority opinion about 1850) related as they are to attitudes toward Henry's brother and toward his mother, have at bottom the accusation of laziness that we must admit could quite naturally arise in an industrious village like the Concord of a century and more ago. There

was another body of adverse Concord opinion, that of the farmers. And they had a different reason for their doubts about Thoreau, his interest in natural history. Village people wondered about that too, but they based their prejudice on slight evidence of industry on Thoreau's part and good evidence of pose. The farmers admitted the lack of industry and a good deal of the pose, though they gossiped more with Henry and knew him better and saw somewhat less pose. Surveying brought him into contact with farmers in a very practical way, and they had a better opinion about him on account of that.

But he was a naturalist and, they suspected something of a poet of nature. The farmers, who are always that element of society which deals most practically with nature, were, understandably in that day, distrustful with Thoreau or anyone else as a naturalist. Even yet naturalists are on the defensive and are the butt of a thousand jokes and the impractical zanies in dozens of movies. If naturalists now when they have status can be made the object of lampooning cartoons because they chase butterflies and count birds, think what must have been the attitude a hundred and more years ago when they lacked status. That a mature man should pick flowers seemed proof of retarded development or effeminacy to a Saxon yeoman of Concord. That a grown man would stay up all hours or get up at the crack of dawn for no more practical reason than to listen to a bird sing was enough to make the farmer think the man as well as the songbird was a bit "twittery." And that a man, a well educated man, would do that most of the time and have no regular job was simply inconceivable.

Those farmers were interested in the mundane matter of crops off their fields. And it is forgivable that they could not understand Thoreau when he said, "I have frequently seen a poet withdraw, having enjoyed the most valuable part of a farm, while the crusty farmer supposed that he had got a few wild apples only." A crop to those farmers was a very physical and bulky thing; and it was their business to make nature produce crops. Wildness was nuisance to them; beauty was silliness. And a man who went around looking at wildness or commenting on beauty was beyond their comprehension. A surveyor's business was to measure acres so they could be sold, not to stand and look at a landscape. There was no money in landscapes -- only in acres.

This suspicion of the poet was not directed against Thoreau particularly, for I think that on the whole the Concord farmers liked Thoreau better than the villagers did. And I am not sure but that Thoreau liked them better than he liked his nearer neighbors in the village. The farmers (except possibly Edmund Hosmer) had the same suspicion of the whole "Walden Pond Association" or transcendentalists and poets. Bronson Alcott was laughed at more openly than Thoreau ever was. Even Emerson felt the pity and ridicule in their glances as he passed and felt obliged to write his poem "The Apology" directed toward Concord farmers and workmen by way of explaining what Emerson preached to others should never be explained or apologized for:

Think me not unkind and rude
That I walk alone in grove and glen;
I go to the god of the wood
To fetch his word to men.

Tax not my sloth that I
Fold my arms beside the brook;
Each cloud that floated in the sky
Writes a letter in my book.

Chide me not, laborious band,
For the idle flowers I brought;
Every aster in my hand
Goes home loaded with a thought.

There was never mystery
But 'tis figured in the flowers;
Was never secret history
But birds tell it in the bowers.

One harvest from thy field
Homeward brought the oxen strong;
A second crop thine acres yield,
Which I gather in a song.

The farmers were, if anything, more outspoken than the villagers about Thoreau -- and it is going some when one Concordian is more outspoken than another. Anyway, we have a record of one farmer's opinion that sums up all the criticisms of Thoreau we have been describing: the parading of differences, the neglect of work, the impracticality of being a naturalist. It is all in the page Mrs. Daniel Chester French put into her Memories of a Sculptor's Wife:

Thoreau I was never fortunate enough even to see, although he was a byword among my friends, having died before those years of my life in Concord. He was laughed at and criticized a great deal, and must have been in many ways a trial to the farmers, having a way of ignoring their rights, and telling them that their complaints about fires in their forests or clearings were stupid, because after all the landscape belonged quite as much to him as to them. Still, he was greatly appreciated by all the people of a literary or intellectual turn of mind. I loved to hear the farmers talk about him. One of them used to say:

"Henry D. Thoreau -- Henry D. Thoreau," jerking out the words with withering contempt. "His name ain't no more Henry D. Thoreau than my name is Henry D. Thoreau. And everybody knows it, and he knows it. His name's Da-a-vid Henry and it ain't never been nothing but Da-a-vid Henry. And he knows that! Why, one morning I went out in my field across there to the river, and there, beside that little old mud pond, was standing Da-a-vid Henry, and he wasn't doin' nothin but just standin' there -- lookin' at that pond, and when I came back at noon, there he was standin' with his hands behind him just lookin' down into that pond, and after dinner when I come back again if there wan't Da-a-vid standin' there just like as if he had been there all day, gazin' down into that pond, and I stopped and looked at him and I says, 'Da-a-vid Henry, what air you a-doin'?' And he didn't turn his head and he didn't look at me. He kept on lookin' down at that pond, and he said, as if he was thinkin' about the stars in the heavens, 'Mr. Murray, I'm a-studyin' -- the habits -- of the bullfrog!' And there that darned fool had been standin' -- the live-long day -- a-studyin' -- the habits -- of the bull-frog!"

That one story contains all the objections of the farmers. The story could be multiplied a dozen times because at one time or another nearly every farmer in the town had seen Da-a-vid Henry standing on his farm a-studyin' something as remote from farm concerns as that bullfrog. There is just a shade of difference between the village gossip about Thoreau and the farm gossip. The farmer didn't resent Thoreau's wide margin of leisure so much, but he resented the seeming impracticality of the naturalist more because it was a relationship with nature so foreign to his own. Not all farmers felt so about Thoreau by any means. Not all villagers felt so either; and almost certainly the farmers were more friendly toward him than the villagers even. But this critical attitude toward what Concordians regarded as a crooked stick was so general that most books about Concord attitudes mention it, and some books like that of Doctor Emerson have been written to counteract it.

Friendly Neighbors

Not all the attitudes were unsympathetic. A good many of the ordinary citizens of Concord understood Thoreau, and liked him, and were indebted to him, for he himself had great neighborliness. Like his father he was a good gossip in both senses of that word -- a neighborly talker and a good friend. Moreover, because he was not immured in a shop or involved in work at the end of some farm, he was available in a neighborhood emergency and with his versatility was the very man to call if someone's household kitten refused to come down from a tree or if the barnyard pig pushed a board loose from its pen.

Then too, there was a whole literary neighborhood in Concord that understood Thoreau. Of that kind of neighborliness he could have more in Concord than in any other New England town of its

size. This was no inconsiderable help toward general understanding. Think how miserable and how marked Thoreau would have been in some other town. But here his misery had company. He could find congenial souls when he needed them. Moreover, the entire town could see that his peculiarities were not absolute idiosyncrasies; and if only a few others acted in any degree as he did it was easier to tolerate him.

I wonder too if Concord didn't have more than its share of semi-Thoreaus, people like George Minott, George Melvin, John Goodwin, and perhaps "Perch" Hosmer, those who hunted and fished the town and had regular occupations with their left hands only. They hit it off very well with Henry Thoreau and he with them. And their mere presence gave a kind of normality and acceptability to Thoreau's way of life. Though, even here, a farmer could understand a man who spent his days and some of his nights hunting or fishing better than he could understand Da-a-vid Henry botanizing, zoologizing, or poetizing all over town. Still, a semi-Thoreau made a Thoreau less conspicuous.

Child Neighbors

But of one last group there is no doubt. The children loved Thoreau and understood him. Like them, he was not mercenary or commercial. Like them, he was no clock-watcher but could give as much time to an incident along the way as the occasion seemed to call for. And unlike almost every other adult in town, either in the village or on the farm, he had time for them and took the trouble to organize little excursions for them and stopped to teach them in what Whittier called "Nature's unhouse'd lyceum."

The children were not very vocal about it when their elders talked about Da-a-vid Henry; but they held all these things in their hearts and later they came to the defense of their good friend and oldtime neighbor. One of them became a national figure. Listen to him:

I knew Henry Thoreau very intimately. I went to school with him when I was a little boy and he was a big one. Afterward I was a scholar in his school.

He was very fond of small boys, and used to take them out with him in his boat, and make bows and arrows for them, and take part in their games. He liked also to get a number of the little chaps of a Saturday afternoon and take them out in his boat, or for a long walk in the woods.

He knew the best places to find huckleberries and blackberries and chestnuts and lilies and cardinal and other rare flowers. We used to call him Trainer Thoreau, because the boys called the soldiers the "trainers," and he had a long, measured stride and an erect carriage which made him seem something like a soldier."

(Geo. F. Hoar, Autobiography of Seventy Years, I, p.70)

And one of them, perhaps the child who knew him best of all, was the son of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Thoreau lived at his house, and Edward Emerson had a good share of his father's insight and sensitivity with which to measure his older friend. Listen to him:

In childhood I had a friend, -- not a house friend, domestic, stuffy in association; nor yet herdsman, or horseman, or farmer, or slave to bench, or shop, or office; nor of letters, nor art, nor society; but a free, friendly, youthful-seeming man, who wandered in from unknown woods or fields without knocking, . . . passed by the elders' doors, but straightway sought out the children, brightened up the wood-fire forthwith; and it seemed as if it were the effect of a wholesome brave north wind, more than of the armful of "cat-sticks" which he would bring in from the yard. . . .

This youthful, cheery figure was a familiar one in our house, and when he, like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, sounded his note in the hall, the children must needs come and hug his knees, and he struggled with them, nothing

loath, to the fireplace, sat down and told stories, sometimes of the strange adventures of his childhood, or more often of Squirrels, muskrats, hawks he had seen that day. . . Then he would make our pencils and knives disappear, and redeem them presently from our ears and noses; and last, would bring down the heavy copper warming-pan from the oblivion of the garret and unweariedly shake it over the blaze till reverberations arose within, and then opening it, let a white-blossoming explosion of popcorn fall over the little people on the rug. . . .

This youth, who could pipe and sing himself, made for children pipes of all sorts, of grass, of leaf stalk of squash and pumpkin, handsome but fragrant flageolets of onion tops, but chiefly of the golden willow-shoot, when the rising sap in spring loosens the bark. . . .

The man of whom I speak was the friend of my childhood and early youth, and living and dead has helped me, and in no common way.

(E. W. Emerson, Henry Thoreau as Remembered by a Young Friend. pp. 1-11, passim.)

After such an introduction, Doctor Emerson wrote his defense of Thoreau because, as he said, "Even in Concord . . . I found that . . . he was regarded unsympathetically by many, and not only the purposes, but many of the events of his life were unknown. The indictments are numerous. . . ." Curiously, the indictments were carried over into a new generation of adults -- the children of Thoreau's own day who had been the beneficiaries of his delightful ways, but who grown up conformed to the conventional attitude of grown-ups toward Da-a-vid Henry and foreswore their first loyalty.

But they didn't all forswear it. Some lived long and defended him here in Concord. I think perhaps that I, along with many of you, knew the last one of those children of Thoreau's day, for I knew Abby Hosmer when at ninety her mind was clear and her memories of "Mr. Thoreau" were vivid and affectionate and grateful.

So, in conclusion, I should like to tell Abby Hosmer's story as she told it to me standing at the window of the old Hunt-Hosmer house. Better than anything I know it corrects the prejudice of the bullfrog story about Da-a-vid Henry.

"One day," she said, "we children saw Mr. Thoreau standing right down there across the road near the Assabet. He stood very still, and we knew he was watching something in the water. But we knew we must not disturb him, and so we stayed up here in the dooryard. At noontime he was still there, watching something in the water. And he stayed there all afternoon."

"At last, though, along about supper time, he came up here to the house. And then we children knew that we'd learn what it was he'd been watching. He'd found a duck that had just hatched out a nest of eggs. She had brought the little ducks down to the water. And Mr. Thoreau had watched all day to see her teach those little ducks about the river."

"And while we ate our suppers there in the kitchen, he told us the most wonderful stories you ever heard about those ducks."

To be a poet and a naturalist is to be misunderstood -- except by children.

THE 1953 ANNUAL MEETING

The 1953 annual meeting of the Thoreau Society was called to order at 10:30 a.m. on July 11, in the vestry of the First Parish Church, Concord by the president Raymond Adams. The secretary's report (See Bulletin 40) and the treasurer's report (See below) were read and accepted. The following officers were declared elected: Raymond Adams, president; Mrs. Caleb Wheeler, vice-president and clerk; Walter Harding, secretary-treasurer; and Mrs. Charles Edwards and Rev. Roland D. Sawyer, members of the executive committee. It was voted that the president appoint a committee to arrange a special meeting to celebrate the centennial of the publication of WALDEN next year. It was suggested that (1) the type in the bulletin be enlarged, (2) more members take out life memberships (\$25) to help underwrite the cost of special booklets, and (3) that the society sponsor a booklet of quota-

tions from WALDEN. The meeting was adjourned at 11 a.m. It was then followed by a lecture on Bronson Alcott by Mr. Basil Burwell and on "A Novelist Looks at Thoreau" by Truman Nelson. Luncheon at the Congregational Church was followed by the presidential address printed above. The afternoon was devoted to visits to a special Thoreau exhibit at the Concord Free Public Library and a tour of the F.B. Sanborn house on Elm Street, through the courtesy of its owners, Mr. and Mrs. H. B. Hosmer.

TREASURER'S REPORT:

Cash on hand, July 3, 1952	\$375.62
Annual meeting (1952)	115.84
Printing	120.67
Postage	100.20
Misc.	34.05
Total expenditure	370.76
Income (dues, gifts, and life memberships)	\$29.00
Cash on hand, July 1, 1953	\$533.86

ADDITIONS TO THE THOREAU BIBLIOGRAPHY WH

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- _____. "Yeats' Early Reading of Walden." BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY QUARTERLY, V (July, 1953), 164-6.
- On the influence of T. on W. B. Yeats.
- Harding, Walter. "Two F. B. Sanborn Letters" AMERICAN LITERATURE, XXV (May, 1953), 230-4. On T's appointment to an examining committee at Harvard and on the genesis of Channing's COUNTRY WALKING.
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- White, E.B. "Visitors to the Pond." NEW YORKER, XXIX (May 23, 1953), 28-31. Senator McCarthy investigates T. Delightful satire.

Once again lack of space forces us postpone many items in this bibliography and omit any acknowledgment of help received. But we hope we may catch up once again with the next issue.

The Thoreau Society Inc. is an informal organization of several hundred students and followers of the life and works of Henry David Thoreau. Membership is open to anyone interested. Fees are one dollar a year; life membership, twenty-five dollars. A price list of back publications may be obtained from the secretary. All material, unless otherwise assigned, is compiled or written by the secretary.

The officers of the society are Raymond Adams, Chapel Hill, N.C., president; Mrs. Caleb Wheeler, Concord, Mass., vice-president; and secretary-treasurer:

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